



State Your Mission

a how-to article

by Ira Allen

Almost every agency has a mission statement. Frequently they are wrangled out in committee meetings, brought laboriously to form, set in ink for posterity, and promptly forgotten. Sure, it might appear on your agency's web page, and it's certainly somewhere in your files, but can you recite it? More important, does it move you? Does it reflect your agency's actual day-to-day activities and inspire growth and confidence, or is it just one more piece of paper?

This article should help you decide (if you don't already know) whether your mission statement is all it's cracked up to be. We'll also give you some tips on what can be done to rewrite it. Because your mission statement should *matter*; it not only says who you are to the world, it says who you are to you.

How to write a bad mission statement

First, look at what your organization does in the most technical terms possible. Next, throw in a bunch of adjectives and descriptive terms like "high quality" and "efficient," and work in some obvious generalizations. Make sure you add some filler words like "therefore" and "thereby," and give an ultra-specific geographic reference or two. Finally put the whole ugly mess into the passive voice. You might end up with something like the one in the box at the top of this page. If that statement

looks hauntingly familiar, it may be time to consider updating your own mission statement.

A certain humility is necessary for assessing a mission statement. Although you may have taken part in writing it, you should still question its relevance. Here are a few points to consider in evaluating your current mission statement.

- Is it accurate? Do you still serve the same population? In the same area?
- Has your agency's focus shifted? Does the statement reflect or allow for that shift?
- Is it inspiring? Does your mission statement reenergize you with belief in what you are doing, or do you have trouble staying awake long enough to wade through it?
- Is it memorable? Do the words fade from your mind as your eyes pass over them, or do phrases linger in your mind?
- Is it too technical? Can the general population understand and identify with it? Can employees of your agency? Can you?

Answering these questions should be helpful in determining whether and/or how much remodeling your mission statement needs.

While we are speaking here of "good" and "bad" mission statements, this is of course a value judgement. If your mission statement still works wonderfully, by all means keep using it. Each agency must determine for itself what it actually wants from this particular management tool. However, if you feel that your mission statement no longer fits your agency, you may want to consider the following general guidelines.

Is your mission statement a snoozer like this one?

"The mission of XYZ Transit Agency is to provide high quality, efficient service to the population of Heretown in Prairiegrass County, utilizing fixed-route service to meet the demands of riders. Therefore it is incumbent upon us to coordinate with other agencies, thereby improving the mobility of the residents of Boondockville and greater Prairiegrass County. This should be accomplished in the most economical manner possible."

A "good" mission statement puts first things first

Of course, no one sits down and tries to write something as awkward and heavy-handed as the above. Mission statements are frequently the result of committee action, which can be the least efficient way to accomplish anything. So if your agency is working with an awkward mission statement, don't feel ashamed. Unfortunately, groups of intelligent people working together seldom produce stirring and meaningful phrases.

The first thing to consider when revamping your mission statement is who should write it. Your best writer is usually a good candidate, but someone who feels deeply and strongly about the agency's mission also may do a good job. Have that person design a mission statement within some general guidelines, and then go over it together as a group.

Once discussion begins, keep it focused on the substance of the statement, rather than the structure and form. The group can often better determine what is important for the agency, but, once again, a single indi-

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vidual is more likely to come up with a strong and inspiring statement incorporating those values.

The writing process

For starters. Now that you've been chosen to write the mission statement, what now? First, look at the mission statement you already have. What is wrong with it? What is right with it? How much of it can be recycled? Now look at the input you received from your Board and staff about what they feel the agency's mission is or should be. How do the two mesh? Do they mesh at all? If not, or if in doubt, don't feel compelled to cling to the old version. Transit is a continuously growing industry, and if your agency has moved on, your mission statement should reflect that.

Keep in mind that a mission statement is not the same as a vision statement. "A vision tends to be an intensely personal thing, often held by the founder or a small, tightly-knit group," while "Mission statements are formal tools of control... they can be used in place of the more personality-oriented vision," writes Thomas A. McLaughlin in *The NonProfit Times*.

The Deli Principle. As you are writing, remember the Deli Principle. Go to any deli and order a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white bread. Chances are good that you'll get precisely what you want. Now go to the same deli and order pastrami and roast beef with swiss and provolone on a toasted sourdough roll, with lettuce, tomato, olives, cucumbers, mayo and a touch of German mustard. The person behind the counter is likely to ask you to repeat some part of your order, and even then there is no guarantee you will

get quite what you ordered or envisioned. This is because the more we human beings try to do at once, the lower our chances of achieving all these goals become.

Does this mean you should settle for less on your mission statement? Absolutely not! But you might do well to pattern your efforts on the simplicity of Pepsi's famous mission statement: "Beat Coke."

Although a transit agency is not a deli, you should still look for some unifying principles behind the various services and goals of your agency, and pare those down until you get to the the essence of why your agency exists. Now you have the basis for a mission statement.

Style. Avoid using lots of adjectives and adverbs. They are often unnecessary, and sometimes even a little ridiculous. After all, who is going to provide inefficient, poor-quality service to worsen the lives of transit riders in their community? So writing the opposite—that you will provide efficient, high-quality service to better the lives of transit riders in your community—is unnecessary. It's a given. The nature of what you wish to do, rather than how you wish to do it, should be the focus of your mission statement. If your focus shifts to describing how you will do things, and you start seeing a lot of words like 'enthusiastically' and 'high quality' in your writing, you are muddying the waters. Stop. Are all these words really needed?

Use the active voice in your writing. According to McLaughlin, the passive voice, in addition to being wishy-washy and boring to read, "subtly suggests passivity and reactive thinking. The cooling effect of the passive voice dilutes a mission statement's power."

A mission statement is a motivational tool. It should help you, your employees, your customers and the

general public remain aware of what your agency is really trying to do, of the larger purpose behind it all. So technical jargon is out, as are clichés.

Finally, be careful about geographic references. Your geographic boundaries could change, and you might want your mission statement to allow for that. Generally speaking, your mission statement should allow room for growth.

The Business Card Test. If you can't capture the thrust of your mission statement, from memory, on the back of a business card, it's probably time to go back and pare down some more. Better yet, if someone else can read your mission and then fit the gist of it on the back of a business card, you're probably ready to take it to the Board.

An example from Kansas

The mission statement for the Paratransit Council at the Sedgwick County Department on Aging/Central Plains Area Agency on Aging is:

To facilitate the coordination of existing transportation services and explore potential resources to promote continued growth and leadership of transportation opportunities in Sedgwick, Harvey and Butler counties.

Valerhy Harmon, Director of Transportation and Physical Disabilities, wrote it with input from her staff.

"The transportation program's mission statement had to reflect the department's, in which the main issue is helping older adults maintain their independence and remain in the community. Add to that what is important in a transportation system—it's safe, accessible and affordable.

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classes to the public at reasonable rates. For example, the University of Kansas offers courses on subjects from using Excel to digital audio editing. Because you are a public entity you may be eligible for a discount.

Buy a service agreement

For hardware support consider purchasing an extended-service agreement when you buy a new computer. These agreements allow you to contact the manufacturer when you experience problems with your computer. Usually you contact the company by phone and a technician accesses your computer via the Internet and attempts to diagnose and correct any problems. If a replacement part is needed it can be sent to you, and the manufacturer can arrange for a third party to install it.

A little caution should be used when purchasing an extended service agreement. It's not uncommon for technical support to keep you on the phone, on hold, 30 minutes or more. If the problem you are calling about affects your Internet connection, the technical support representative will have difficulty diagnosing the problem. The knowledge level of support personnel can also vary significantly. If you get a relatively green representative, you might have to call again to find someone better able to diagnose the problem. Keep in mind that you will likely be waiting on hold every time you call.

The final option is to take your computer to a local service center or have a technician come to your office whenever problems occur. With a limited budget this option should be reserved for only the most difficult problems.

Combine your resources

Ultimately good technical support will entail most or all of the options

listed above. Make sure that members of your staff are trained to handle the everyday software questions and occasional hardware issues that may come up. You can purchase service agreements or use outside vendors for the big problems.

If you decide to try to tackle most problems in-house, assign a full-time employee who already has some basic computer knowledge and who works well with other members of your staff. It is possible that your staff already have a person they go to with technical questions.

Why full time? A part time employee will not always be available to assist when problems occur.

Respect your employees' time

Develop a hierarchy for handling technical problems. The designated technical support person probably has another job to do, and his or her time needs to be respected. When employees have basic questions they should seek assistance from those around them. If the problem cannot be solved, call in your technical support employee. He or she should not feel forced to do their own job plus help everyone else in the office.

By incorporating the suggestions made here you will be better able to manage technology issues in your office. Attempting to deal with problems after information is lost or employees are on edge is not management. Make sure that you have a system in place for dealing with issues as they arise.

Sources

"How To Support Your Computer and Internet Systems," by Coyote Communications, www.coyotecom.com

"Technology Planning," by Anna Mills, www.techsoup.org ▲

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There you have it, basically," she said.

This is a great example of the process for generating a mission statement described above. Harmon sought input from others and, keeping the basic values of the agency at large in mind, sat down and wrote a mission statement. It's not necessarily easy, but it can be simple.

So now what?

You've gone through all the trouble of getting your Board to agree on the big picture, sampled opinions from employees and based your new mission statement on that. Your Board has reviewed the new statement and they are impressed. It's bold, it's inspiring, it's who you hope to be as an agency. So now what? Put it on the web site? At the head or foot of office memos? Hang it in the buses?

Sure. Those are all possibilities, and there are many more. These possibilities will be explored in greater depth in the next issue of the newsletter. And if you'd like to share some innovative or effective ways your agency is using its mission statement, e-mail Ira Allen at iraa@ku.edu or call (785) 864-2598.

In our next issue we will also give some tips for boards of directors in asking the big-picture questions necessary to create a mission statement.

Once you've written your mission statement, don't let your efforts go to waste. Put it out there. Make it visible. Let your staff know it matters. Make it matter to you. State your mission, and state it loud.

Sources

"Mission Statement: A Facelift Can Make a Difference" from *The NonProfit Times*, August 1, 2002;
KUTC Mission Statement Packet (compiled by Pat Weaver). ▲